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Joint Inspection Unit

Environmental profile of the United Nations System organizations

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “Environmental profile of the United Nations System organizations” (JIU/REP/2010/1).

* A/65/150.



Summary

The Joint Inspection Unit report entitled “Environmental profile of the United Nations System organizations” (JIU/REP/2010/1) examines the policies and practices of United Nations system organizations as they work towards environmental sustainability.

In the present note, the consolidated views of the United Nations system entities on the recommendations in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit are presented. The United Nations system entities welcome the report and generally support its main recommendations, including, inter alia, the need for common guidelines for developing environmental management systems adapted to the needs of United Nations system organizations and the need to properly record expenses associated with reducing carbon emissions. Organizations also generally agree with the recommendations regarding establishing common practices for sustainable procurement; however, they note that these recommendations cannot be implemented until Member States have addressed this issue.

I. Introduction

1. The Joint Inspection Unit report entitled “Environmental profile of the United Nations System organizations” (JIU/REP/2010/1) examines the policies and practices of United Nations system organizations as they work towards environmental sustainability. The report reviews past and current efforts by organizations to become climate neutral, and explores a range of issues, including the role of carbon offset purchases and the overall development of an environmentally friendly profile for the United Nations.

II. General comments

2. The United Nations system entities welcome the analysis by the Joint Inspection Unit of the environmental practices across United Nations system organizations and are generally supportive of all the recommendations.

3. Commenting on the concept of carbon offsetting, and the requisite budget for this, organizations indicate a preference for focusing on emissions reduction over procuring offsets. They note that, by emphasizing carbon offsets and their costs, stakeholders, including Member States, risk overlooking what organizations perceive as the more important issue of reducing the institutional carbon footprint, and the resources required to achieve overall emission reductions. Therefore, while organizations agree that there is a commitment to the United Nations climate neutrality initiatives, they suggest that too much emphasis on carbon offsets could prove counterproductive.

4. Organizations suggest pursuing an approach that would allow each United Nations organization to proceed with carbon offsetting as fits its operating model. For example, for smaller organizations, which may have a smaller carbon emissions footprint, purchasing carbon offsets may not have a considerable effect on their budget and therefore would prove to be a viable approach. In all cases, organizations suggest that it may be advisable for the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) to: (a) clearly state that emissions reduction is the primary objective and that resources should first be devoted to this activity, before any offsetting step; (b) seek a mandate on the broader issue of environmental/sustainable management that allows for more flexibility in planning and implementation; and (c) allow each organization to decide if it will or can offset in its own budget.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Secretary-General, as Chair of CEB, should:

(a) **Assemble systematically and update intergovernmental instruments and internal guidelines on in-house environmental management with the assistance of the Environment Management Group and under the guidance of author bodies;**

(b) **Ensure that CEB streamlines these documents into common guidelines to serve as a basis for developing in-house environmental management systems adapted to the respective needs of the organizations of the United Nations system;**

(c) **Submit a periodic report to the General Assembly on the progress made on the development of principles and policies applicable to in-house environmental management.**

5. Members of CEB support this recommendation, noting that harmonized guidelines and standards for the United Nations are clearly needed in order to facilitate proper implementation of environmental management practices.

Recommendation 2

The General Assembly should periodically review the application of principles and policies on in-house environmental management on the basis of the report of the Secretary-General on this subject.

6. While organizations generally support this recommendation, they stress the need to focus on strengthening existing agreed upon policies prior to proposing potential new approaches to environmental management.

Recommendation 3

The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to report by its sixty-sixth session on the current status of implementation of the climate-neutral initiative and its contribution to improving the environmental profile of the United Nations system, including identification of administrative and budgetary requirements to support its implementation, and seek guidance from Member States on the management framework and financing of resources required for its implementation.

7. Agencies agree with the recommendation, but prefer to stress that the “identification of administrative and budgetary requirements to support [the] implementation” of the climate neutral initiative should focus on emissions reduction efforts and very little on offsets.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of the organizations, in consultation with CEB, should:

(a) **Put in place common administrative and financial guidelines to integrally record and report in the proper budget lines those expenditures incurred both in reducing CO₂ emissions and in purchasing carbon offsets for the implementation of the strategy for a climate-neutral United Nations;**

(b) **Improve the measurement and reporting of the environmental practices and expenditures of their organizations through the use of the environmental management accounting document developed by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs so as to better disclose financial and environmental decisions.**

8. Organizations support the need to “record and report in the proper budget lines” the expenses associated with reducing CO₂ emissions, as called for in the

recommendation, and many report already taking steps in that direction. Several organizations note that they have already accomplished reductions in emissions through actions that do not require funding, such as by limiting travel; however, other actions, such as re-engineering HVAC systems, will certainly require budget allocations. Organizations stress, however, that Member States, and particularly the United Nations General Assembly, have not come to an agreement regarding the procurement of offsets.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General, acting as Chair of CEB, in close coordination with the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and with the assistance of the Environment Management Group, should launch an internal clearing-house mechanism to offset those emissions that cannot be reduced through in-house environmental measures by using the Clean Development Mechanism without prejudice to carbon offsets made through the existing mechanisms and/or initiatives already under way within the United Nations system.

9. While organizations support the recommendation, they express some reservations regarding the claim that the system “would achieve significant financial savings” through the proposed mechanism, which organizations believe requires further study.

Recommendation 6

The executive head(s) of organization(s) should negotiate, wherever appropriate, with the host country(ies) where their respective organizations are located agreements providing for support by the host country for the implementation of the plans and policies of United Nations system organizations to green their premises and offices, ultimately to be added as an annex to the headquarters agreement.

10. While organizations generally accept the spirit of the recommendation, they also expressed some confusion and reservations regarding the scope and modalities of its implementation. Organizations point out that United Nations facilities fall into various categories: some are rented from private entities, some are leased from Governments and some are owned by the United Nations organization involved. For each country and each organization, the approach would need to vary and might or might not involve the host-country agreement. Furthermore, if the recommendation is expected to cover all offices, rather than just headquarters locations, this exercise can become unrealistic, as some organizations have offices in over 100 countries.

11. Nonetheless, organizations indicate full support for an approach that requests executive heads to seek opportunities with the host countries in a joint effort to implement an organization’s environmental plans and policies, and thereby lead by example.

Recommendation 7

The Secretary-General, acting as Chair of CEB, should:

(a) **Extend his leadership, with the assistance of the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in promoting system-wide overall in-house environmental management policies;**

(b) **Issue a statement of his initiative through CEB towards defining a time-bound common framework for in-house environmental strategies designed to promote compliance by its member organizations with all multilateral environmental agreements;**

(c) **Ensure that each executive head of CEB member organizations establishes, implements and improves an environmental management system adapted to their situation and based on an environmental management policy.**

12. Organizations agree with point (a) of the recommendation, particularly with the need to have UNEP coordinate the system-wide overall in-house environmental management policies, as its expertise and its network with respect to the issue are unique in the United Nations system.

13. Regarding point (b), organizations note that the “time-bound framework”, which may be proposed by CEB, has to take into consideration the mandate and the availability of the financial and human resources of its member organizations. Organizations stress that the quality of the implementation should be the first priority, which would mean proposing a realistic deadline with respect to the resources available. It would also be preferred that the multilateral environmental agreements provide guidelines on their respective areas of expertise/mandate.

Recommendation 8

The executive heads of those organizations participating in the United Nations centres common support services in the locations where their premises and offices are established should agree to introduce environmental considerations based on local best practices and adopt an environmental management system to be mainstreamed into the management of their common facilities and building and procurement services.

14. Organizations support this recommendation, but note that the phrase “environmental considerations based on local best practices” should correspond to any adopted United Nations minimum standards.

Recommendation 9

The executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system should define, where appropriate in consultation with their governing bodies, the legislative basis and common norms and standards applicable to their in-house environmental management system, based on best practices identified within the system. They should also ensure that their respective staff are fully aware of and responsible for this policy through the promulgation of internal instructions and information accessible to all.

15. Organizations agree with the recommendation, although some CEB members question the need for legislation within governing bodies. They fully support the

need for effective communication with staff members and feel the recommendation could have been strengthened by proposing compulsory training, as suggested in paragraph 94 of the report.

Recommendation 10

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations involved in field activities should establish in-house sustainable procurement policies and guidelines, taking account of the local conditions of the host country and the needs of field offices.

16. Organizations generally support this recommendation, which they note can only be implemented once the governing bodies, and in particular the United Nations General Assembly, approve the principle of sustainable procurement. For example, at the United Nations, the General Assembly is currently reviewing the global field support strategy, in which regional support services and procurement and modularization concepts are outlined. Only after the outcomes of these debates within the governing bodies can institutions determine whether or not they can implement this recommendation.

17. Organizations note, however, that sustainable procurement remains a key component of a successful environmental management system, since such a system must identify significant environmental aspects of the products and services used and purchased by the facility (see 4.4.6.c of the ISO 14001 standard). The environmental management system can adopt specifications for suppliers aimed at improving the environmental performance of the products and services they provide.

18. Organizations further note that UNEP has published a number of guidelines that can be used for this purpose.

Recommendation 11

The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of CEB, to promote mutual exchange of views and lessons learned from experience through a peer-review process among the organizations in the Environment Management Group, to enhance their environmental management and performance.

19. Organizations support this recommendation but suggest that the proposed peer review preferably should be done by organizations facing similar challenges.

Recommendation 12

The Secretary-General should ensure that systematic communications and advocacy activities are carried out to inform the staff, as well as Member States and the public, of the progress made in the efforts of the organization on:

- (a) **Improving in-house environmental management and performance;**
- (b) **Establishing a sustainable image of the United Nations system organizations and their commitments on environmental policies and practices through their partners and relevant stakeholders.**

20. Organizations support this recommendation.